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An Inaugural Dissertation
on
Dropsy in the Cellular Membrane
by
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Passed March 22d 1825

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By this is meant a preternatural collection of watery or serous fluid in the cellular texture of the body. It usually commences with swelling of the feet and ankles, appearing at the close of the day, which for some time disappears in the morning. The tumefaction is soft and inelastic, and when pressed upon with the finger the indentation remaining for some time, the skin becoming much paler than usual. Ascending gradually upwards, the swelling occupies the thighs, trunk and face. When it has become thus general the viscera are affected in a similar way, producing difficulty of respiration by effusion into the cellular tissue of the lungs. The bowels in this disease are uniformly constipated, the skin dry and sometimes hot, the pulse febrile, small, and corded, and there is in almost every case great thirst, the urine small in quantity, and usually deposits a reddish sediment. To these symptoms speedily succeed torpor, heaviness & a slow fever. The serum now becomes depressed through the skin or raises it in blisters. If relief is not speedily obtained from these symptoms, the system soon sinks under hectic fever

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With respect to the pathology of this disease much Controversy has existed, and indeed the only point which at present seems fully established is that it arises from the destruction of the balance which naturally exist between exhalation and absorption - There is in perfect health a continual exhalation of a watery fluid in the various cavities of the body which serves the purpose of lubrication after which end is attained, it is constantly removed by the absorbents Dropsical effusions thence, it becomes evident, must arise either from an excess of effusion, or from a decay of the powers of absorption - As our belief in the one or the other must materially influence our practice, It would be a very desireable thing for this point to be settled - The European writers believe that it depends altogether upon debility and relaxation of the System & consequently place confidence principally in Tonic medicines, but their want of success is a sufficient refutation of their opinion - The Practitioners of this country perhaps has gone too far on the other hand, their remedies being almost entirely depletory - In all probability it exists in either state of the System, and we should at all times be on the alert to detect the one or the

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In the treatment of this disease the indications are

1st. To evacuate the water already collected.

2nd. To effect a change in the system which causes the effusion.

And first of the disease as connected with high action. It is fortunate that the remedies which reduce arterial action, invigorate absorption. These two systems acting in an inverse ratio. The practitioners of this country proceed on this principle & bleed in this particular species of the disease. but it must be used with discretion. and to justify this remedy, the pulse should be hard, tense and corded, and the blood when drawn exhibit the signs of high inflamation. with other usual signs of inflamation. Emetics from their great efficacy in promoting absorption, might be supposed well suited to this disease. but they have now given way to purgatives. and are never resorted to except to clear the stomach of its offending contents.

Purgatives in this disease, are beneficial not only as increasing the discharge of water, but also as one of our best means of overcoming high arterial action, & relieving constipation.

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The question next arises, how frequently is their repetition demanded? It was the practice of Sydenham to prescribe them daily unless the debilitated state of the patient should forbid their use — this must be esteemed generally as correct for it is only by their frequent repetition that we can expect much permanent benefit — In the selection of the appropriate purgative, some discernment is necessary —

The drastic purgatives by many have much used, particularly the older writers, with a view to their hydragogue powers — but in the inflamatory stage I hold them, as inadmissible — here much benefit may be expected from the saline purgatives particularly the Super Tart: Potass: in combination with Jalap — given in doses of ℥ss or ℥ij of the former with X or XV grains of the latter repeated sufficiently frequent to keep up a continual Diarrhœa — By this remedy prescribed as above directed the disease has frequently yielded in a few days — The above remedies, although they frequently fail of curing the disease, generally produce a sufficient reduction of excitement — Our next remedies should be directed

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to the Lymphatic System. Of all the Diuretics the one best suited to this particular Stage of the disease from our Considering the Sulph: Tart. Potash is best suited - This has long had the Confidence of Practitioners and every day experience I believe tends to Confirm the Confidence placed in it. Its operation as a Diuretic is much influenced by the quantity of water with which it is given - Given without much drink it seldom fails to pass off by Stool - The Vegetable and mineral Alkalies with the same View have by some been extolled & by others Condemned

With respect to their mode of operation some differences of Opinion exist - Cullen believed their diuretic powers depend when their meeting with an acid in the Stomach forming an acetate. Were this true the Acetate of Potash would be preferable - and decidedly more uniform and active in its operation as a Diuretic which I believe is Contrary to the experience of Practitioners generally - The Cases in which the Alkalies are beneficial, are when there is much debility in the organs of digestion, as frequently happens in habitual drunkards - and in those Cases attended with great acidity of the Stomach

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which produces very distressing effects — I should not omit here to mention a fact which I believe originated with Sir John Pringle, that by combining the Alkalies with a Tonic we greatly increase their powers thus activated they not only act as a diuretic, but impart tone to the System generally — The next remedy I shall speak of is the Acet: Potass: — As a Diuretic it is inferior to most articles of the Class but its great efficacy arises from the power it has over the Arterial System — & to Dropsies attended with high arterial action it is eminently adapted — The great objection to its use is that it cannot be given in sufficient doses & continued for any length of time without producing considerable distress of Stomach nausea &c — this objection we are told by the Professor of the practice may be overcome by administering the medicine in large quantities of water — As a substitute the dulcified Spirits of nitre may be used — this has not the confidence of Practitioners generally, which proceeds in all probability from their prescribing it in too small doses instead of ℥ss or ℥j daily it should be given in doses of ℥ss repeated as fre-

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Of the mild native Vegetable diuretics. I shall only mention one viz: the Common Parsely – this possesses very considerable diuretic properties, & we have been told by Doctr. Chapman that he succeeded in curing a case with this remedy, after all others had failed. as the Article can be obtained without cost this fact should be recollected particularly in poor practice –

The following formula, which we should not suppose, was discovered accidentally by Doctrs. Chapman & Wistar to possess very powerful diuretic properties viz:

℞ Tinct: Opii – ℥ss

Dulc. Spts: Nit: ℥ij

Mix. Ad: ℥ij. 40.

With the above remark it was my intention to have dismissed the native Vegetable diuretics, but the Pellitory, claims some consideration, it is I believe resumed in reputation both in this Country & in Europe – It is given in infusion or in extract –

The chronic stage of the disease next demands our attention – here when Constipation is present the drastic purgatives

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although inadmissible in the inflamatory Stage become necessary The purgatives here demanded are Calomel with Gamboge - also the Colchicum Autumnale - Scammony Elaterium &c - Notwithstanding what has been said in opposition to their use. Owing to the very great Torpor of the Alimentary Canal they are demanded and are of great utility. less irritating purgatives are of no avail - The following formula has been found of great utility in the practice of the Asylum house in this Stage of the disease viz.

℞ Elater: 1 gr. / One - Sixteenth to be given in a Small
Gamboge - 4 o } quantity of water, every hour - untill
Dulc: Sub: Mur - 12 gr. } Copious watery evacuations are produced -

The next article of which I think Great use is made in this disease is Digitalis - This Article maintains a very considerable reputation in this disease - by Some it is extolled above all other remedies, while others condemn it as totally ineffacious, This difference of opinion proceeds in all probability from their prescribing in different States of the System - As a general rule I think it will never prove beneficial So long as the System

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will bear with impunity evacuations either by bleeding or purging.

I come now to speak of one of the most important, and certain of our diuretics viz. the Squill, there is no form of dropsy in which it is not useful. It is usually given in combination with calomel in the proportion of 2 grs of the former with one of the latter, two or three times a day.

Should in the progress of the disease a cachectic and debilitated condition of the system arise, the more stimulating articles are demanded. In such a case the Cantharides may prove beneficial from their know power of producing strangury. They may be thought of doubtful efficacy, but if one is excited state of the system that they are the specific, in the particular state of the system now under consideration they prove a powerful and efficacious diuretic. It is given in tincture in doses of from 20 to 100 drops repeated pro re nata. Under certain circumstances the spirits of turpentine might be supposed useful, I do not know that any trials sufficient to establish its efficacy have been made.

It is rare that the Digitalis purpurea should be used

From stimulating into extreme, regularly, its influence on every part of the System more especially by Tartrate of Antimony & Potash to all other remedies but such I believe is not the estimation in which it is generally held.

Neighboring has also occasionally resorted to, in the inverse, they have been employed both in this Country and in Europe with sufficient success to warrant their occasional use. One Case of this disease, very speedily and effectually cured by the liberal use of Tartar emetic is mentioned Dr. Thatcher in his Therapeutics, as occurring in his own practice.

Various modes for producing deobstruents by external applications have been adopted, none of which I shall mention, as I believe them less efficacious than Combinations of Opium & Calomel given internally.

When this disease is kept up by Venereal disease as was well shewn, & authoritative, the use of mercury & iron as previously mentioned, it may be beneficial combined with Squills & also with Digitalis.

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In those Cases of Dropsey attended with demeinished absorption, mercury is likewise admirably suited - & should under such circumstances not be overlooked - But in the Common forms of Dropsey it will not in any way promote the Cure and may do injury ——

The local means usually resorted to in Cases of excessive ~~in Case of excessive~~ distention are incisions, & punctures & Blisters

To the use of these remedies particularly to the extremeties Considerable objections exist - Gangrene and mortification has been know to follow particularly Blisters -

Less objections exists as to the use of punctures, great Care should be taken not to wound parts much beneath the Skin, from inattention to this circumstance, Erysipellatous inflamation, and all the Consequences so much to be dreaded from the use of blisters has resulted - much benefit may be derived from the use of the roller, it proves benficial by giving support to the weakened & relaxed Vessels -

To prevent the recurrence of Anasarca the may-resort to the roller as above, it should be made of flannel

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The Cold bath, has been recommended, but I think it generally of doubtful efficacy, and may frequently prove injurious.

The most effectual plan is the exhibition of Tonics of them the Bark and Chalibeates are perhaps preferable – Exercise judiciously employed should not be overlooked – with respect to the diet it should be nourishing and at the same time easy of digestion – Should the disease still show a strong disposition to return we should produce a total change in the system by the judicious administration of Mercury prescribed merely with a view to its alterative effects.

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